



# Indiana State Department of Health

## Epidemiology Resource Center

### Quick Facts

#### **About... Head Lice (Pediculosis)**

##### **What are head lice?**

Head lice are tiny parasitic insects that survive by feeding on human blood and are the most common type of lice. Head lice are found on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. Head lice do not jump or fly and also do not burrow under the skin.

Adult head lice appear the size of a sesame seed and are tan or grayish-colored. A nymph or immature louse is the same color but much smaller. Nits, or eggs, are stuck to the hair shaft within ¼" of the scalp and appear oval and whitish colored. After the louse hatches, the shell remains on the hair shaft as the hair continues to grow and darkens in color. The life-span of an adult louse is 30 days; lice can only live 1-2 days away from the human host.

##### **How are head lice spread?**

Head lice are spread by direct contact with an infested person's head or by direct contact with an infested person's belongings such as combs, brushes, towels, hats, bedding or clothing items. Head lice can also crawl from the head of an infested person to other upholstered or fabric surfaces such as beds, couches, pillows, carpeting or stuffed animals and spread to household contacts. Pets can not spread lice from person to person and the lice that affect pets do not infest humans. An infested person is able to spread the head lice as long as live bugs or viable nits are present.

##### **Who is at risk for head lice?**

Individuals who are in close contact with an infested person are at greatest risk for head lice. Young children ages 3 – 10 years and families with children this age are infested more frequently. Head lice are also more

common among girls and less common in African Americans. Poor personal hygiene and cleanliness do not increase the risk for catching head lice.

### **How do I know if I have head lice?**

Itching is the most common symptom of head lice infestation and is caused by an allergic reaction to louse bites. The scalp may appear red from scratching and individuals who are infested may feel a sensation of tickling or a feeling of something moving in their hair.

The best way to detect head lice is to separate the hair at the base of the neck or around the ears to look for the nits or live lice using a fine-tooth comb. Other particles in the hair such as dandruff, hair casts or dirt may look like nits; however, they can easily be removed with fingers. When looking for head lice, nits are easier to visualize than adult lice. Nits found within ¼" from the scalp are usually alive indicating an active infestation.

### **How can head lice be treated?**

Head lice can usually be treated with over-the-counter medications, known as pediculicides. It is important that seek the advice of a healthcare provider if there are questions about the head lice shampoos or medications.

Most treatments that are currently available are considered to be pesticides and can be toxic if used inappropriately or too frequently. Be sure to follow the instructions provided with the medication. Extra shampoos may be needed for people with thick or long hair. Most treatments that are available do not kill the unhatched nits. Retreatment in 7-10 days may be necessary to kill nits that may have hatched after the first treatment.

After treatment, all nits and remaining bugs should be removed from the hair using a fine-tooth comb. If the live bugs are still active 12 hours after the treatment is applied, there may be signs of resistance. Consult a healthcare provider for further treatment recommendations. Prescription-strength medication may be needed if head lice show signs of resistance.

It is important to check the heads of infested persons for signs of a secondary bacterial infection resulting from scratching, including redness, and crusting of the scalp. These infections may require additional treatment.

Household contacts should be checked for signs of an active infestation every 2-3 days. All persons with live lice or nits found within ¼" of the scalp should be treated. It is important to treat infested family members at the same time to prevent reinfestation. Do not treat family members who are not infested.

On the day of treatment, other measures should be taken to clear the home of the infestation including:

- Laundering all linens, clothing, hats worn by an infested person used or worn within two days of the treatment application. Hot water and dry heat for at least 20 minutes should be used. Dry cleaning is recommended for items that cannot be laundered.
- Seal any items in a plastic or garbage bag for two weeks that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned.
- Vacuum rugs, upholstered furniture, mattresses used by infested individuals
- Boil combs, brushes and other personal items that are plastic or metal. Items that cannot be boiled can be soaked in rubbing alcohol or another sterilization product.

### **How is head lice prevented?**

Do not share hairbrushes, combs or hats that belong to other people.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Website on head lice at:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/lice/>

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